



UNDER DEVELOPMENT

David Robinson's devotion to duty knows no bounds; when most people are sleeping off their hangovers, he's mulling over the problem of transferring data between notebooks and contemplating the joys of C#

I'm on the normally busy bit of the M62 motorway between Leeds and Manchester. And I am completely on my own. There's nothing in front of me and no-one behind tailgating, honking or otherwise being a pain. Nothing to impede my stately progress.

Am I dreaming? Is this what happens when you eat blue Stilton before going to bed?

Actually the reason for my solitude is that it is six o'clock in the morning and it's Sunday 1st January. New Year's Day. And I'm on my way to Manchester Airport to catch US Airways flight 197 to Philadelphia with an ongoing connection to Baton Rouge. And I'm doing this on New Year's Day because, as usual, I'm between a rock and a hard place.

In this instance, the rock is the fact that I've copped for jury service starting in mid-January and the hard place is an American client acquiring two new customers, and their requirements mean additions and changes to our Logistix software package that does shipping and warehousing stuff. This also involves training and implementing some new barcode-scanning routines, and it all has to be in place before the end of January. Could I get out of the jury service? Well, in theory I could ask to be excused, but when I sent back the forms I didn't have a good enough excuse. Sod's law being what it is, the day after I posted the forms the Americans decided that it was imperative that I went. So here I am.

HEAVY METAL

With both these events on the horizon, I realised that I was going to be out of the office for almost six weeks and I would have to fit lots of tasks into snatched moments of sanity. I use a laptop most of the time, but it's hardly the easiest thing to lug about and use on the move. Once upon a time, a laptop really was just that – my old AST Ascentia (which I still have but don't use) has a footprint of just 279x228mm. My current Sony Vaio – nice though it is, with built-in DVD, hi-res screen, 60GB hard disk and every kind port for any storm – is at least half as big again in every direction and weighs a



ton. That's without the housebrick-sized power supply, which weighs another ton.

As you'll have read in recent columns, I've made some progress in the transition from monster Filofax to a Palm PDA. It's fine for organising me and doing some occasional word processing, but I couldn't rely on that as my main computer for six weeks. Fortunately on my last (pre-Katrina) visit to Baton Rouge I'd retrieved the miniscule JVC sub-notebook, as we'd found a way of using Palm PDAs as the prime hosts for our Bluetooth barcoding software; they were cheaper, neater and less prone to being messed up by users, so the JVC was redundant. I have now decided to press that into service for the interim period. At just 203x152mm and with hot-swappable batteries, it's very easy to carry around and use on the move.

Sadly, deciding to use it and getting it in a fit state to use are two different things. The hardware's basically OK, but it has just 128MB of RAM, so it could do with at least another 128MB and preferably a total of 512MB. If your computer's a bit slow, you'll probably find that boosting the RAM is the simplest

and quickest way of getting a performance boost. But I haven't yet managed to add more RAM, so I'll have to put up with less than blazing performance if I want portability.

SOFT ROCK

Then there's the software. I'd previously installed Office 2003, but when I examined the Vaio there were at least 20 different applications I use frequently that needed to be installed on the JVC. Most of this software went on OK once I'd found the right cable for linking the JVC to its external CD-ROM drive (here's a hint: always label all hardware-specific cables so that, if you don't use them for a while, you can easily identify which one does what. Did I do that? Er... do as I say, not as I do.)

Then there's the data. I had to copy all my documents and project designs to CD so I can at least refer to them if needs be. Then, very importantly, there's my current and archived email. As most of my written communication with customers is by email, having this to hand is vital.

I thought this would be easy. I copied the files outlook.pst and archive.pst to a pen drive from their

home in C:\Documents and Settings\DR\Local Settings\Application Data\Microsoft\Outlook (a short and easy data path to remember). Unfortunately, I couldn't find the equivalent path on the JVC. Was this because I hadn't actually used Outlook on that computer and the files and path hadn't been created? Nope – I tried that, and several other things besides.

It was only after two hours of faffing about that the penny finally dropped and I realised why I couldn't find the destination folder. On the Vaio I use Ontrak's Powerdesk software instead of the piss-poor Windows Explorer. On the JVC I was attempting to save space so hadn't installed Powerdesk and was using Explorer – which, unless you specifically tell it otherwise, doesn't show you hidden files and folders. Powerdesk, which I'm used to, treats users like adults and shows everything. One setting tweak, and I could see the destination. I now have all my emails with me.

PHILLY SOUL

Then there's the operating system. I had to upgrade Windows XP Professional Edition to SP2 before I could install the trial version of MS Visual Studio. I wanted to use my time on the flight to start learning the C# .NET language and had a disc that came with *Build a Program Now!* by Patrice Pelland (ISBN 0735622299). For non-programmers or those moving from other languages, this is an easy and cheap introduction that includes the C# Rapid Application Development (RAD) environment plus a local copy of MS SQL server.

Anyway, after getting up in the bowels of the night and arriving in Manchester in plenty of time for check-in, I was looking forward to a coffee to wake me up before boarding. What do I get? A long wait in a queue for the ticket desk. The plane's broken down, still in Philly, and the bloody flight's been cancelled. ☹

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